

Duality in Girish Karnad's *The Fire and The Rain*

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad has composed numerous plays to tackle contemporary issues. Karnad likes to split the persona, present a conflict and urge a confrontation between dualities. He does this in all his plays. The present study analyses conflict, tension and duality in Karnad's *The Fire and The Rain*. It is a dense, intellectually ambitious autumnal play. The play is structured around ideas and excess of strangled relationships, which unfolds with a rare economy and intensity of emotions. Conflict is defined as a struggle between two or more individuals over perceived incompatible differences in beliefs, values, and goals, or over differences in desires for esteem, control, and connectedness. These differences are a constant breeding ground for conflict. Conflict has been studied from multiple perspectives, including inter-personal conflict and intra-personal conflict. Duality arises out of conflict. As the title of the play *The Fire and The Rain* suggests the play focuses on the negative and positive human emotions – jealousy, betrayal, deceit as well as selfless love. The play presents the celebration of fire with Vedic rituals for the appeasement of the divine, peace and happiness of the mankind. But just behind the screen of the art, Karnad associates the aesthetics of Brahmanism with the mind games of egocentrism. All the lead characters in the play; Raibhya, Bharadwaja, Paravasu, Arvasu, Yavakri and Vishakha are involved in the practice of evil and sin. There is the cycle of evil in the play which leads to conflict among the characters of the play. Virtue wins in the play. But it is too late. The death of virtuous low caste girl, Nittilai, makes it a tragedy. The play is the fine analysis of human

psyche in the depiction of jealousy of man against man, father against son, brother against brother, wife against husband, and high caste against low caste. Conflict is an inevitable part of the play *The Fire and The Rain*.

Keywords: Egocentrism, Confrontation, Antithetical, Denunciation, Treacherously, Patricide, Gratification

Girish Karnad as an actor, director, filmmaker, playwright and a Rhodes Scholar, is the most outstanding personality of Indian drama who experimented and experienced folk theatre, feature films of art and culture, commercial television serials on contemporary social and political issues. He is a recipient of the 1998 Jnanpith Award, the highest literary honour conferred in India. Karnad has been composing plays, borrowing themes from history, legend, myth and folklore to tackle contemporary issues. He has translated his plays into English and has received acclaim. He is active in the world of Indian cinema working as an actor, director, and screenwriter, in Hindi and Kannada cinema, earning awards along the way. He was conferred Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan by the Government of India and won four Filmfare Awards, of which three are Filmfare Award for Best Director – Kannada and the fourth a Filmfare Best Screenplay Award.

In his plays, *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Tale Danda*, *Naga-Mandala*, *The Fire and The Rain*, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, *Bali: The Sacrifice*, *Flowers*, *Broken images* and *Wedding Album* he tries to create problem of duality and tension among the characters revealing the ambiguity inherent in human personality. The present study analyses conflict, tension and duality in Karnad's *The Fire and The Rain*. It is a dense, intellectually ambitious autumnal play. The play is structured around ideas and excess of strangled relationships, which unfolds with a rare economy and intensity of emotions.

Karnad likes to split the persona, present a conflict and urge a confrontation between dualities. He does this in all his plays.

This creates the integrating dynamics of the plot and builds a dramatic tension. The strategy works well in both the structuring of the plot of plays and characterisation of the protagonist. Conflict is defined as a struggle between two or more individuals over perceived incompatible differences in beliefs, values, and goals, or over differences in desires for esteem, control, and connectedness. These differences are a constant breeding ground for conflict.

Conflict has been studied from multiple perspectives, including inter-personal conflict and intra-personal conflict. Inter-personal conflict refers to the disputes that arise between individuals, societies and nation. Such clashes can be the cause of war in the society or the world at large. The four elements – struggle, interdependence, feelings and differences – are critical ingredients of inter-personal conflict. Intra-personal conflict refers to the discord that occurs within an individual. This conflict can develop out of our own thoughts, ideas, emotions, values and predispositions. Duality arises out of conflict.

The Fire and The Rain is the Karnad's play of jealousy, power-politics, sexual-exploitation, humiliation and isolation of characters. As the title of the play *The Fire and The Rain* suggests the play focuses on the negative and positive human emotions – jealousy, betrayal, deceit as well as selfless love. Dr. Archana Rathore writes, "'The Fire' is the fire of revenge, lust, anger, envy, treachery, violence and death. 'The Rain', on the other hand, symbolises self-sacrifice, compassion, divine grace, forgiveness, revival and regeneration." (Rathore, Archana: 192)

As Punam Pandey says, "In the play there is a conflict of jealousy, rivalry, ambition and treachery" (Pandey, Punam: 152). Expressing similar views Bhagabat Nayak observes, "Karnad presents the conflict between Brahmin versus shudra, ascetic versus actor-performer, god versus demon and *yajna* versus *natya*" (Nayak, Bhagabat: 48). The play presents the celebration of fire with Vedic rituals for the appeasement of the divine,

peace and happiness of the mankind. But just behind the screen of the art he associates the aesthetics of Brahmanism with the mind games of egocentrism.

The play is the transcreation of his Kannada version of the play, *Agni Mattu Male*. Although the theme of the play is an approximation to the original myth it appears mindboggling as well as mind-blowing when it is cinematised as *Agnivarsha* with the direction of Arjun Sajani. Defining the title in the 'Notes' of the play, Karnad counterpoints two physical elements which are normally seen antithetical. He writes in 'Notes':

'Agni' is the Sanskrit word for fire. And being a Sanskrit word, it carries, even when used in Kannada, connotations of holiness, of ritual status, of ceremony, which the Kannada word of fire (*benki*) does not possess. 'Agni' is what burns in sacrificial altars, acts as witness at the weddings and is lit at cremations. It is also the name of god of fire...

'Male' is a Kannada word. It means rain, pure and simple. It has none of the aura of romance, mystery and grandeur that surrounds Sanskrit words of rain when used in Kannada. 'Mattu' means 'and'. It is usually left out in spoken Kannada. (Karnad, Girish: 63)

In the play Raibhya and Bharadwaja belong to a priestly family. Their sons have spoilt their relationship in a feud for knowledge, superiority and power. Raibhya's sons Parvasu and Arvasu gain position in society but their cousin Yavakri is engaged in acquiring knowledge for ten years without proper learning. As he remarks, "I want knowledge so I can be vicious, destructive!" (Karnad, Girish: 23). Yavakri is vengeful because his father is neglected and not invited to the King's fire sacrifice as the chief priest where his cousin Parvasu acts as a chief priest. Secondly, Parvasu had married Vishakha with whom Yavakri had his youthful love. Time is the great factor that plays important role in the play. Knowledge does not help Yavakri as it is overpowered by passion.

Soon after his arrival from *tapasya* he molests Vishakha to satisfy his senses and to take revenge on Raibhya's family. Yavakri's molesting to Vishakha may be due to his previous love for her or revenge for insults inflicted on his father but in return Raibhya creates a demon, a spirit in form who destroys Yavakri. This makes Bharadwaja remorseful with his son's death. He curses Raibhya to suffer death in the hands of his own son and then kills himself in remorse. Parvasu's return from the king's fire sacrifice for his sensual gratification with Vishakha breaks the sanctity of fire sacrifice. He mistakes his father as a wild animal due to his wearing of the deerskin and accidentally kills him. Although, Parvasu orders Arvasu to perform his father's penitential ceremony he accuses him of patricide when Arvasu returns to the fire sacrifice. All the lead characters in the play are involved in the practice of evil and sin. There is the cycle of evil in the play which leads to conflict among the characters of the play. Virtue wins in the play. But it is too late. The death of virtuous ones makes it a tragedy.

Yavakri's *tapasya* for knowledge without an insight into the human nature is 'self-immolation'. Parvasu's patricide and betrayal to his younger brother, is denunciation of human values, and Arvasu's performing his father's penitential rite and love for low caste girl Nittilai is 'self-effacement' and 'self-mortification'.

Conflict is an inevitable part of the play *The Fire and The Rain*. Arvasu, who is so badly treated by the society that he doubts his own existence:

I am dying of thirst. But there's no water. Then I peer into a huge well. There's water there, but it has my reflection in it. I stare at it. And the reflection snarls: "Why are you staring wretch? Go away." So I say: 'You exist because I stare. You wouldn't be there if I went away.' It says: 'You think so, do you, you swollen headed doll of flesh? I'll show you.' And the reflection leaps out of water. Gouges my eyes out. Chews up my face in its jaws. I scream, but I have no face....It keeps on returning, that nightmare, so that now

I'm not at all sure it's me standing here and not my reflection.
(Karnad, Girish: 51)

Even Paravasu has to face tremendous conflict when, in the play, he sees Indra murdering Vishwarupa treacherously. He jumps to his feet and cries:

No. No. Wrong! That's wrong!.... He saw a face by the altar.
Whose face was it? The face of my dead father? Or of my brother,
who is a simpleton, yet knows everything? Or was it my own
face? (Karnad, Girish: 55)

While Yavakri is not sure enough that even after ten years of rigorous penance when he has acquired Universal Knowledge, he says:

One would expect the appearance of a God to be a shattering experience. Concrete. Indubitable. Almost physical. But though I think Indra came to me several times, I was never certainAnd when the God disappeared; nothing was left behind to prove he had ever been there. (Karnad, Girish: 13)

When he was asked how he decided that he has acquired Universal Knowledge, he replies:

I have no clear recollection how I arrived at the conclusion – some knowledge, but probably little wisdom. I know now what can't be achieved. That itself is wisdom....I think I have some mystical powers I hadn't before. Mastered a few secret arts. Got a few mantras at my fingertips. (Karnad, Girish: 14)

Even Raibhya curses himself, for fathering such sons. He, instead of getting pride of fathering a son who is invited and honoured to be the Chief Priest of the Royal Fire Sacrifice, was himself ambitious of getting the invitation from the king to become the chief priest. But the king thinks of his old age and invites Paravasu. At this, Raibhya is furious and says:

So you measured my life-span, did you-you and your king?
Tested the strength of my lifeline? Well, the sacrifice is almost over and I'm still here. Still here. Alive and kicking. (Karnad, Girish: 29)

This outburst is obvious when Vishakha, her daughter-in-law, utters:

Something died inside your father the day the King invited you to be the Chief Priest. He has been dying up like a dead tree since then....There's his sense of being humiliated by you. (Karnad, Girish: 32)

As P. Jayalakshmi views, "Gender and caste become the dominant factors" (Jayalakshmi P, 250). Vishakha is surrounded by learned men but leads the life of an oppressed woman. She is a woman abandoned twice by her youthful lover Yavakri for sake of knowledge before her marriage and her husband Paravasu for the fire sacrifice. Paravasu is ambitious to the extent of using his wife's body for his means. As Vishakha says:

Nothing was too shameful, too degrading, even too painful. Shame died in me. And I yielded. I let my body be turned inside out as he did his own. I had a sense he was leading me to something. Mystical? Spiritual? We never talked. Only the sense pervaded in the air...Then one day he received the invitation from the king. To be the chief priest of the fire sacrifice. And he left. (Karnad, Girish: 16)

Paravasu accepts the invitation of becoming the chief priest of the royal fire sacrifice not because he wants to use his divine knowledge in bringing rain and helping common people. But he treats *Yajna* as an instrument of his gratification.

I went because fire sacrifice is a formal rite: Structured. It involves no emotional acrobatics from the participants. The process itself will bring Indra to me. And if anything goes wrong, there's nothing the gods can do about it. It has to be set right by a man. By me. That's why when the moment comes I shall confront Indra in silence. As an equal. (Karnad, Girish: 32)

This proves that Paravasu is ambitious and wants to challenge Indra and to be equal with God. Moreover, Paravasu comes to his father's hermitage, and thus "deliberately defying gods" (Karnad, Girish: 28) by "Wilful transgression of rules" (Karnad, Girish: 29). At which Raibhya explodes:

The Chief Priest of the royal sacrifice sneaks out at night, crawls home, his face covered like a leper, and you think the god won't know? They won't retaliate (Karnad, Girish: 29)

Thus, the protagonist of the Fire Sacrifice, i.e., the Chief Priest, Paravasu, doesn't have faith in *Yagna*. He considers it as a formal structured ritual. So he doesn't involve emotionally and spiritually.

Competition and jealousy are the results of ambition. When Yavakri seduces Vishakha, Raibhya, in an extempore reaction, tells Vishakha to, "Go and tell your lover I accepted this challenge" (Karnad, Girish: 20). He invokes a Brahma Rakshasa, a demon soul, to kill Yavakri. Incidentally events crop up and, as a result, Yavakri dies.

Paravasu kills Raibhya, his father knowingly before his wife, Vishakha, as he says:

He deserved to die. He killed Yavakri to disturb me in the last stages of the sacrifice. Not to punish Yavakri, but to be even with me" (Karnad, Girish: 33).

Yet he speaks untruth to Arvasu, "I mistook him for wild animal." (Karnad, Girish: 34)

Nittilai plays a very crucial role in the play. It is she who exposes the caste consciousness of high caste people in the society and as a hunter girl; she is loud in commenting on the selfish and lustful behaviour of high caste men, "These high-caste men are glad enough to bed our women but not to wed them" (Karnad, Girish: 8). She does not leave even God of high caste people when she says, "Why are Brahmins so secretive about everything?" (Karnad, Girish: 10). She further supports her argument by saying, "Then how does everyone know what happened in the remote corner of the jungle – miles away from the nearest prying eye?" (Karnad, Girish: 9). When she knows that Indra has pleased and granted him the boon of the Universal Knowledge, she questions at Yavakri's integrity, "Actually, I want to ask Yavakri two questions. Can he make it

rain? And then, can he tell when he is going to die?...Just two. What is the point of any knowledge, if you can't save dying children and if you can't predict your moment of death?" (Karnad, Girish: 11).

In spite of everything her immortal and casteless love for Arvasu wins. Nittilai is killed by her own tribe and family men for her inter-caste and inter-religious affiliation in filial bonds with Arvasu. Arvasu, who is pure and acts without self-interest, remains alive in the end that brings rain. He, in the real sense, has acquired the true knowledge of humanity.

The play presents the fine analysis of human psyche in the depiction of jealousy of man against man, father against son, brother against brother, wife against husband, and high caste against low caste. In deeper level the play presents man against god, freedom against bondage, rituals against sacrifices, hate against love, attraction against repulsion, illusion against reality, passion against knowledge, ignorance and falsehood against truth, arrogance against generosity and victory of truth against viciousness of life.

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